

# Winter Mellowing His Blues

Johnny Winter, who performed at the Palladium a few months ago with an all-star blues group built around Muddy Waters, was back Saturday night with his own band. The changes his music has undergone since he began touring nationally in the late 1960's were evident, and largely salutary. But in one respect, at least, his music had come full circle, from hard blues through hard rock and back to the blues.

Although he was often a subtle and convincing blues man on the early recordings he made in his native Texas, Mr. Winter's first real success was as a master of blues overkill. With his trio jacked up to hitherto unprecedented volume levels, Mr. Winter always played fast, meaningless fistfulls of notes where one would do.

Mr. Winter still concludes most of his numbers with frenetic instrumental raving, but his playing has gained much in depth and expressivity and something, at least, by way of restraint. His choice of repertory on the current tour is significant. The jumping-off points

for his improvisations are not flashy Delta pieces as of old but blues couplets as venerable as the original recordings of Tommy Johnson and John Estes and blues standards from the 50's.

A lengthy performance of Memphis Slim's "Mother Earth" was a highlight Saturday. Mr. Winter sang it with real feeling and used his bottleneck to deliver a delicate, well-paced solo with a brooding sense of drama and affecting, voicelike inflections. Eventually, of course, the song built to a thrashing conclusion. But Mr. Winter had demonstrated that he really can be the subtle, idiomatic blues musician his supporters have always thought him to be. Taste and restraint seem to be coming as he grows older, and while one might wish for accelerated progress in these respects, it seems inevitable that in a few years, at least, Mr. Winter will be worth hearing as a blues man, and not as a frenetic rock guitarist who uses the blues as a jumping-off point for self-indulgent jamming.

**ROBERT PALMER**